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GENERAL

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7 December 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR: Special Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Khrushchev's Cuban Venture
in Retrospect

I thought that you might be interested in our
assessment of Khrushchev's Cuba venture.

Ray S. Cline

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Deputy Director (Intelligence)

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Attachment

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15 FEB 1963

The basic motivation underlying Khrushchev's bold gamble in deploying strategic missiles to Cuba was the compelling need of a dramatic breakthrough which would strengthen the USSR's position on a whole range of questions in the contest with the US. The Cuban venture had the direct and immediate purpose of strengthening Khrushchev's position for a major diplomatic showdown on the Berlin and German questions which he planned to launch before the end of the year.

Background

Khrushchev had been groping over the past year and a half for some means of extricating himself from the impasse created by his failure to force the West to accept a Berlin settlement on Soviet terms. His statements during this period reflected a growing concern over the steady erosion of the USSR's over-all position vis-a-vis the West. The introduction of strategic missiles into Cuba provided, in his mind, the most effective means of scoring a dramatic victory over the US which would enable the USSR to recover the diplomatic initiative and achieve a decisive advantage in a new round of Berlin negotiations.

Khrushchev also believed the creation of Soviet missile bases in Cuba would greatly enhance the USSR's ability to deter another US-supported attempt to destroy the Castro regime.

The opportunity for Khrushchev's bold stroke arose when it became apparent last spring that the rapid deterioration of the Cuban economy and the growing demands in the US for active intervention in Cuba

required prompt and far-reaching action to avert a crisis for the Castro regime. Moscow was thus in a strong position to exchange vital economic and military assistance for Castro's consent to the deployment of missiles in Cuba.

A second major element in Khrushchev's decision was a major reassessment in early May which substantially downgraded the prospects for achieving a Berlin settlement on acceptable terms. This new estimate represented a marked change from the optimistic view which prevailed in Moscow following Gromyko's talks with Secretary Rusk at Geneva in March.

Bloc spokesmen in late March expressed confidence in an early Berlin settlement, and the USSR took a variety of steps designed to improve the atmosphere. These included the suspension of Soviet flights in the Berlin air corridors and measures to restore normal relations between the Soviet and US commandants in Berlin.

In an interview with an American publisher on 20 April, Khrushchev said he was prepared to meet with President Kennedy again and professed to see a "glimmer of hope" for a Berlin agreement. Gromyko also took a hopeful line in his speech to the Supreme Soviet on 24 April. He stated that, although obstacles remained, his talks with Secretary Rusk had demonstrated the desire of both governments to "search for a rapprochement of positions."

These hopeful appraisals were based on Moscow's reading, or misreading, of the proposals for a modus vivendi which Rusk had outlined to Gromyko in March. The Soviet leaders interpreted these proposals as

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~~marking a significant change~~
in the US position and as an indication that the US was finally ready to undertake serious negotiations.

Moscow's euphoria, however, was short-lived. The Soviet press began to display uneasiness over the future course of the negotiations after the NATO ministerial meeting in Athens in early May. Pravda charged the US with raising new obstacles in order to stall the talks and displayed sensitivity to statements by Secretary Rusk and General Clay which contradicted the optimistic assessments of Khrushchev and Gromyko in late April.

By mid-May, the Russians had begun to draw back from their earlier efforts to restore normal relations between the Berlin commandants

By late May or early June, it seems likely that Khrushchev had decided to set aside further diplomatic efforts on Berlin and to undertake a rapid build-up of offensive weapons in Cuba during the summer months.

Buildup in Cuba

Khrushchev would never have undertaken the Cuban venture if he had not persuaded

the clandestine introduction of the missiles and confront the US with a fait accompli which would deter any effective US military reaction. He must have recognized that in advancing Soviet strategic power to Cuba he was greatly reducing the margin of safety which had characterized his major decisions in the past. He apparently permitted himself to believe, however, that the very high stakes involved justified the increased risks.

The outcome of this venture strongly suggests that Khrushchev simply did not candidly examine the consequences of failure. The great advantages that would flow from this operation combined with the heavy pressures on him to contrive a strategic breakthrough made Khrushchev especially vulnerable

Throughout most of May and June, the USSR applied forced-draft measures to assemble the necessary personnel and equipment for the rapid shipment and installation of an advanced weapons system in Cuba. At the end of June, Khrushchev adopted a threatening tone in discussing Berlin with Austrian leaders in order to convey an impression that the Soviet position was hardening. He complained that the US was the captive of Bonn on Berlin policy and that the resulting US inflexibility made a Berlin solution impossible.

The beginning of the heavy shipments of equipment and personnel to Cuba in mid-July was accompanied by new Soviet political initiatives designed to set the stage for the diplomatic showdown on Berlin planned for late 1962 and to divert world attention from the military buildup in Cuba. Khrushchev announced a new proposal to replace West German occupation

forces in West Berlin with troops of four smaller NATO and Warsaw Pact powers under United Nations jurisdiction. Bloc spokesmen hinted privately that a separate peace treaty would be signed within the next two months. On 21 July, Moscow announced its intention to resume nuclear testing.

Despite these efforts to persuade the West to believe that events were moving toward a Berlin showdown, Moscow refrained from breaking off contacts with the US and from generating fear of an impending acute crisis. It aimed instead at a gradual buildup of the war of nerves which apparently was intended to reach a climax after the missiles were in place and Khrushchev was ready to make his dramatic appearance at the UN in late November.

The Crucial Period

The Soviet leaders appear to have regarded the period from late August through the first part of October as the time of greatest danger and vulnerability for their Cuban operation.

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The Soviet premier, however, seems to have been less concerned about the possibility of a US invasion than about a naval blockade or other measures to interdict Soviet shipping to Cuba, at least in the initial phase of US reaction.

Throughout this crucial period, the Soviet Union did its best to divert Western attention from the heavy

influx of Soviet equipment and personnel into Cuba. On the diplomatic front, the Russians spread the impression that they were developing major new proposals with regard to Berlin, and Khrushchev told visitors that he was considering placing Berlin before the General Assembly personally. In Berlin, the Russians exploited incidents along the wall in late August to fill the air with charges of Western "provocations" against East Germany. They dominated the headlines with the "crisis" over the use of Soviet armored personnel carriers to transport guards to the Soviet war memorial in West Berlin. Moscow also kept up a steady drumfire against alleged US preparations for an invasion of Cuba.

Under the pressure of increasing US attention to Soviet military deliveries, Moscow decided in early September to abandon the pretense about the nonmilitary character of these cargoes. In a joint communiqué on 2 September at the end of the visit to Moscow of Che Guevara and Emilio Aragones, Moscow publicly acknowledged for the first time that it was providing military assistance and technicians to Cuba. Soviet propaganda, however, denied that the USSR was sending military forces to Cuba or establishing military bases on the island.

The Soviet statement of 11 September was Moscow's most important effort to deter US intervention in Cuba or US actions against Soviet shipping and to gain sufficient time to complete the installation of the missiles. It may have been inspired by the Soviet leaders' concern that President Kennedy's 7 September action in requesting congressional authority to call up 150,000 reservists might have been only the first of a series of US actions against the buildup and that the US had detected the true nature of the equipment being introduced into Cuba.

The statement charged that the US was "preparing for aggression."

against Cuba and other peace-loving states" and warned that an attack on Cuba would signal the "beginning of the unleashing of war." It sought to check the growing alarm in the US over Moscow's intentions by stressing that Soviet military equipment in Cuba was designed "exclusively for defensive purposes" and by denying that the USSR planned to establish missile bases there.

But the USSR's most striking maneuver to inhibit US reaction, and undoubtedly the most effective in Khrushchev's judgment, was the declaration in the 11 September statement of a "pause" in Berlin negotiations until after the US elections. This was calculated to establish a link between Berlin and Cuba, with the clear implication that the USSR would not aggravate Berlin tensions if the US would refrain from intervention in Cuba. Khrushchev clearly believed that his strongest deterrent against US action to halt the buildup in Cuba was to portray Berlin as a Soviet hostage.

Although Moscow displayed considerable concern in the first half of October about US intentions and uncertainty about the extent of US information regarding the nature of the military equipment arriving in Cuban ports, Khrushchev appears to have remained confident as late as mid-October that US reaction would be confined to verbal protests, agitation in the UN, and possibly limited action to reduce the volume of Soviet shipments to Cuba. He seems to have interpreted the US posture in September and the first half of October as having confirmed his confidence that the Cuban gamble would succeed and that the US in the end would accept the presence of Soviet missiles rather than face a possible direct military confrontation with the USSR.

When the US reaction during the week of 22 October abruptly transformed what had

foreign policy gamble into his greatest defeat, the Soviet premier displayed a very sober understanding of the real "correlation of forces" in the world. He recognized that he had no choice but to cut his losses and that any meaningful Soviet military response, not only in Cuba but in Berlin or elsewhere, was impossible because the failure of his Cuban venture also meant the failure of this bid to overcome US global strategic superiority.

The Week of Crisis

The Soviet leaders' initial reaction to President Kennedy's address on 22 October was designed to deter US military intervention in Cuba and to gain time in which to extricate themselves. They were careful to refrain from any commitments to specific countermeasures but, at the same time, they sought to avoid the appearance of acquiescing to the measures announced by the President.

Statements by several Soviet spokesmen that the ships would proceed to Cuba and refuse inspection by US naval vessels. Khrushchev's first concern was to prevent incidents which might make the crisis more difficult to control.

The Soviet leaders also promptly announced measures intended to underscore the USSR's military preparedness to meet any eventualities. The Soviet statement of 23 October in response to the President's speech was aimed at gaining time for maneuvers to generate pressure on the US to lift the quarantine and abstain from military action against the missile bases. The statement did not specifically deny the existence of the missiles but repeated the September claim that Soviet military equipment in Cuba was "designed exclusively for defensive purposes."

Khrushchev's immediate aim was to inhibit Washington's freedom of action by drawing the US into negotiations. On 24 October he called for a summit meeting and, on the following day, promptly accepted U Thant's appeal for negotiations and a temporary suspension of Soviet military shipments and the US quarantine.

24 October. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's desire to prevent any escalation of the crisis and to avoid provoking the US was also reflected in the limited military preparedness measures that were undertaken. There was no evidence of any significant major redeployments or of any readiness

Khrushchev's Retreat

By 25-26 October, Khrushchev had become convinced that the situation was critically dangerous and had to be liquidated at once. The firmness of the US attitude made it clear that Soviet maneuvers to gain time and involve the ~~USSR~~ in protracted negotiations were failing. In addition to the rapid concentration of US forces in the Caribbean area, the Soviet leaders probably received information which led them to believe that a US air strike against the missile installations or an invasion of Cuba might be imminent.

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Confronted with these ominous prospects, Khrushchev decided that immediate action was required to avert US military intervention which would spell complete disaster for his Cuban venture, inflict enormous damage on the USSR's world position, and make the risks of any meaningful Soviet response elsewhere in the world prohibitive. On 26 October, he dispatched his long, rambling private letter to President Kennedy, indicating in guarded language Soviet willingness to accept US terms for a settlement.

In less than 24 hours, Khrushchev sent another letter to the President which was published immediately in Moscow. It called for reciprocal Soviet-US withdrawals of offensive weapons from Cuba and Turkey under international supervision and for mutual nonaggression guarantees covering these two countries. This letter may have been part of a Soviet contingency plan prepared in advance to provide a line of retreat if the missile buildup should be detected prematurely and if US reaction was stronger than expected.

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Khrushchev probably hoped his offer of such a deal would help cover his retreat and stimulate UN pressures on the US to accept this offer as a basis for immediate negotiations.

Despite the inconsistency between his two letters, Khrushchev probably believed that the US leaders would regard the unpublished private message of 26 October as his real position and would dismiss the later one as a face-saving propaganda maneuver.

President Kennedy's 27 October reply, stating that Khrushchev's private proposals of 26 October "seem generally acceptable" opened the way for the Soviet premier's public backdown on 28 October. He then informed the President that a "new order" had been issued to dismantle the missiles and return them to the USSR. He rep-

resented the President's offer to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba as a formal commitment and declared that, in view of this alleged pledge, "the motives which induced us to render assistance of such a kind (offensive weapons) to Cuba disappear." Khrushchev also committed the USSR to reach agreement "to enable UN representatives to verify the dismantling of these means."

Postcrisis Negotiations

Khrushchev then moved quickly to get negotiations for a settlement under way, to impress the US with his good faith in carrying out his commitments, and to minimize Soviet responsibility for any complications which might arise. Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov, who was immediately dispatched to New York, assured Ambassador Stevenson on 30 October that the missiles would be dismantled and removed in two or three weeks, after which verification could be carried out by any means the US desired. Gromyko also reaffirmed to Ambassador Kohler on the same day the Soviet desire to reach an agreement as quickly as possible.

Moscow's desire to guard against a collapse of the negotiations and possible US action to break the impasse was

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Nikoyan's urgent trip to Havana via New York also reflected the Soviet leaders' concern that Castro's tactics might jeopardize the negotiations, revive the danger of US military action, and thwart the USSR's efforts to salvage its position in Cuba and the world.

In the first half of November, Soviet negotiators took